

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 COME-00 EB-08 INR-10 LAB-04
NSAE-00 SIL-01 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 L-03 NSC-05
PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11 /079 W
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R 071738Z JUN 78
FM AMEMBASSY PARIS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2846
INFO AMEMBASSY BONN
AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY MADRID
AMEMBASSY ROME
AMCONSUL BORDEAUX
AMCONSUL LYON
AMCONSUL MARSEILLE
AMCONSUL NICE
AMCONSUL STRASBOURG

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USEEC

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: ELAB, FR
SUBJECT: THE FRENCH LABOR SCENE: RISING TENSIONS?

REF: PARIS 15901

1. SUMMARY: A MINORITY OF WORKERS, APPARENTLY MOTIVATED BY ECONOMIC GRIEVANCES, HAVE DISRUPTED SOME OF OF RENAULT'S OPERATIONS WITH WILDCAT STRIKES. THINGS ARE NOW RETURNING TO NORMAL, BUT THE GOVERNMENT'S FRIENDS AND FOES ALIKE ARE WONDERING IF THESE DISTURBANCES MAY NOT BE THE FIRST REACTION OF THE COUNTRY'S
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WAGE EARNERS TO RISING PRICES AND UNEMPLOYMENT, AND A MUCH TOUTED SOCIAL OPENING THAT SEEMS TO BE GOING NOWHERE IN PARTICULAR. END SUMMARY.

2. DURING THE LAST DAYS OF MAY, ALL FRANCE WAS SURPRISED BY AN OUTBREAK OF LABOR UNREST IN AN UNEXPECTED QUARTER: THE STATE-OWNED RENAULT AUTO FIRM. BEGINNING

AT THE COMPANY'S FLIN FACTORY, NEAR PARIS; THEN SPREADING TO A SMALLER ENGINE PLANT AT CLEON, NEAR ROUEN; AND FINALLY TOUCHING, SLIGHTLY, SOME OF THE OTHER UNITS, GROUPS OF WORKERS WENT ON STRIKE AND, IN SOME CASES, OCCUPIED THEIR WORKPLACES. AS FAR AS CAN BE DETERMINED, THESE STRIKES WERE ALL SPONTANEOUS AND ECONOMIC IN MOTIVATION. AT THE IMPORTANT FLINS PLANT, THE WALK-OUT WAS SPARKED BY SOME 45 MALIAN WORKERS (FOOLISHLY CONCENTRATED, RENAULT TELLS US PRIVATELY, IN ONE CRITICAL PARTS SHOP) WHO WALKED OFF THE JOB IN SUPPORT OF A COMPATRIOT WHO HAD BEEN SUSPENDED FOR DISCIPLINARY REASONS. THIS GESTURE OF NATIONAL SOLIDARITY QUICKLY TURNED IN A MORE PRACTICAL DIRECTION, WITH THE MEN THEN DEMANDING PAY INCREASES, A FIFTH WEEK OF PAID VACATION, AND, MOST IMPORTANTLY, A RAISE IN THEIR JOB CLASSIFICATIONS FROM THE OS (SPECIALIZED WORKER) TO THE P (PROFESSIONAL) LEVEL. (DESPITE THE FRENCH NOMENCLATURE, THE CHANGE, IN AMERICAN TERMS, WOULD MEAN CHANGING THE CLASSIFICATIONS FROM UNSKILLED TO SKILLED. WITH THIS, THE WORK STOPPAGE SPREAD TO OTHER SECTIONS OF THE FACTORY, BUT AT NO TIME WERE MORE THAN A SMALL MINORITY OF THE 20,000 WORKERS INVOLVED. (INTERESTINGLY ENOUGH, THE PRESS HAS IGNORED OR SUPPRESSED THE KEY ROLE THE MALIANS PLAYED AS A GROUP IN LAUNCHING THE STRIKE).

3. THE STRIKE CAUGHT RENAULT'S MANAGEMENT AND THE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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UNIONS INVOLVED (CGT, CFDT AND FO) BY SURPRISE, BUT ALL DID THEIR BEST TO PREVENT THE SPONTANEOUS UNREST FROM SPREADING; THE UNIONS BY TRYING TO GET OUT IN FRONT AND PROVIDE LEADERSHIP; MANAGEMENT BY TAKING A HARD LINE (INCLUDING CLOSING FLINS) IN HOPES OF FRIGHTENING OFF ANY ESCALATION. SO FAR THIS UNSPOKEN COOPERATION HAS PROVEN SUCCESSFUL, AND THE FLINS PLANT HAS NOW BEEN CLEARED OF STRIKERS BY POLICE ACTING ON A COURT ORDER. THE CLEON PLANT WILL PROBABLY BE CLEARED WITHIN THE NEXT 24 HOURS TOO.

4. DESPITE THE SUCCESS OF THIS CONTAINMENT EFFORT AND THE RELATIVELY SMALL NUMBERS OF STRIKERS INVOLVED, THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF THE STRIKE ON MANAGEMENT, THE UNIONS, AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC HAS BEEN SIGNIFICANT. THE MEDIA HAVE BEEN PLAYING UP THE STORY, LINKING THE STRIKES TO THE RECENT PRICE INCREASES, THE MORE IMPORTANT ONES THAT ARE YET TO COME, THE SEEMING LACK OF ANY PROGRESS SO FAR IN THE SOCIAL OPENING, AND THE RISING RATE OF UNEMPLOYMENT; AND THERE IS SPECULATION THAT THIS STRIKE MIGHT BE JUST THE FIRST OF MANY SUCH REVOLTS. (IN THAT CONNECTION, IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT THE START

OF THE RENAULT STRIKE COINCIDED WITH A CALL BY THE
CFDT'S TEXTILE WORKERS UNION, ONE OF THE MOST EXTREMIST
ELEMENTS IN THAT CONFEDERATION, FOR A WORKER OCCUPATION
OF THE PLANTS OF THE TROUBLED BOUSSAC TEXTILE EMPIRE,

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A CALL WHICH WENT IGNORED). IN ENGAGING THAT KIND OF
SPECULATION, THE PRESS WAS NOT TRYING TO STIR UP ANY-
THING, OR INDULGE THE OVERWHELMINGLY ANTI-GOVERNMENT
BIASES OF ITS LABOR-AFFAIRS REPORTERS, BUT RATHER FAITH-
FULLY REFLECTING WHAT APPEARS TO BE WIDESPREAD GENUINE
CONCERN (SEE REFTEL). BOTH FO GENERAL SECRETARY BERGE-
RON, AND HIS CFDT COUNTERPART MAIRE, HAVE PUBLICLY
WARNED THE GOVERNMENT, IN SIMILAR LANGUAGE, THAT ITS
POLICIES (OF LIBERATING PRICES WHILE CONTINUING TO HOLD
DOWN WAGES) RUNS THE RISK OF HEIGHTENING SOCIAL TENSIONS.
BERGERON SOUGHT AND OBTAINED A MEETING WITH THE PRIME

MINISTER MONDAY NIGHT TO DISCUSS THE OVERALL SITUA-
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TION. HE EMERGED FROM THAT TWO-HOUR MEETING EMPHASI-
ZING THE NEED FOR A NEGOTIATED AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE
UNIONS AND RENAULT TO SETTLE ALL ISSUES IN THE DISPU-
TE. (FO TELLS US PRIVATELY THAT PRIOR TO THE STRIKE NEI-
THER MANAGEMENT NOR THE CGT, EACH FOR ITS OWN REASONS,
WANTED AN AGREEMENT ON OUTSTANDING ISSUES). PREDICTABLY,
THE EPISODE HAS ALSO BEEN GIVEN VARIOUS POLITICAL IN-
TERPRETATIONS. THE CGT HAS SEIZED ON IT AS EVIDENCE OF
THE INSINCERITY OF THE GOVERNMENT AND ITS SOCIAL
OVERTURE; THE SOCIALIST PARTY HAS DENOUNCED RENAULT FOR
CONDUCT UNBECOMING A STATE-OWNED FIRM; AND THE OTHER
POLITICAL PARTIES ARE BEGINNING TO CHIME IN AS WELL --
LOOKING FORWARD TO A POSSIBLY TROUBLED FALL, SOME OBSER-
VERS ARE NOW BEGINNING TO INCREASINGLY WONDER WHETHER
THE RPR, FOR EXAMPLE, MIGHT NOT TRY TO CASH IN ON SIMI-
LAR PROBLEMS BY DISTANCING ITSELF FROM THE BARRE GOVERN-
MENT.

5. QUITE APART FROM DEMONSTRATING THE STATE APPREHENSION
WHICH NOW PREVAILS, THE STRIKE ALSO REVEALED THE EXTENT
TO WHICH NEITHER GOVERNMENT NOR MANAGEMENT, NOR ORGANI-
ZED LABOR CAN BE COUNTED ON TO IDENTIFY IN ADVANCE, POS-
SIBLE FLASH POINTS. THE FRENCH SYSTEM OF INDUSTRIAL RELA-
TIONS SIMPLY DOESN'T PROVIDE ENOUGH FEEDBACK FROM THE
SHOP FLOOR TO PERMIT THAT KIND OF PULSE-TAKING, AND THAT
MEANS THAT WITHIN LIMITES, EVERYONE IS FLYING BLIND.
FOR THE MOMENT, THE GOVERNMENT'S FRIENDS AND FOES ALIKE
ARE WONDERING IF THESE DISTURBANCES MAY NOT BE THE FIRST
REACTION OF THE COUNTRY'S WAGE EARNERS TO RISING PRI-
CES AND UNEMPLOYMENT, AND TO A MUCH TOUTED SOCIAL OPE-
NING THAT SEEMS TO BE GOING NOWHERE IN PARTICULAR.
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